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Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizens

SHIRLEY HSIAO-LI SUN

London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 208 p.

There is growing awareness that persistent low fertility constitutes a significant threat to the future of developed societies. Birth rates well below replacement level are leading to declining populations and aging. That awareness is late in coming because so much attention has been focused for so long on the dangers of overpopulation. Ironically, some of today's lowest fertility rates are found in countries that only recently suffered from what was deemed to be excessively high birth rates. Singapore is one of those countries: three decades ago, the government of Singapore was still implementing policies aimed at depressing fertility. Yet today, Singapore suffers from lowest-low birth rates, with a total fertility rate of around 1.3.

What makes Singapore especially interesting and important as a case study is that it has been such a success story in terms of economic development—and that its success has been largely the result of activist policies followed by its government. There are many countries whose governments have followed a hands-off approach to population or have been faint-hearted in their approach, enacting legislation that is ineffective or not enforced. Singapore is not such a case. Its government has been interventionist in population policy just as it was in economic policy, but with far less success. Understanding the failure of Singapore's pronatalist policies is not only important for Singapore; it is important for other countries facing the same problem. This issue has been widely discussed before, but until now no one has done the kind of empirical research among concerned populations that can explain this policy failure. That's what makes Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun's book so important. Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun's work with women enables us to find out what they think about government policy and why they are not responding to it by having more children.

Over the course of several comprehensive and dense introductory chapters, Sun establishes the context: the causes for declining birth rates globally, the various strategies employed to reverse them, the policies employed in Singapore. That is followed by a discussion of the nature of economics and politics in Singapore. For Sun, Singapore's goal is to create a productivist economy in which the hard working are rewarded, as opposed to a social welfare state: ". . . the central concern that has shaped the Singaporean government's policies in social provisions and population policies have been molding 'productive' citizens; the ideal citizen in the eyes of the state is an 'economically' productive one" (p. 68).

Singapore provides primarily monetary incentives for parents. These include income tax relief and rebates, child care subsidies, a baby bonus, priority for public housing, paid maternity leave of 12 weeks, and six days paid child care leave. Public sector employees receive other benefits, notably the right for women to work part time after childbirth.

The heart of the book is a discussion of what Sun learns from interviews and focus groups with women and their families concerning the motivation behind their decision-making on having children, and their reaction to government incentives. Nothing is more compelling than hearing the words of the women themselves. Ironically, one reason for low birth rates in Singapore is that its citizens have learned to think the same way as the state: to make decisions about how many children they want based on economic calculations.

The benefits provided by the government do not come near the cost of raising children. For those who are not well off, these benefits constitute "too little of a good thing." Not much is free in Singapore; there are fees for secondary schools and extra programs, and child care is not inexpensive. Those who are better off want to "give their best" for their children, which usually means the kind of education that will maximize their chances for success in a competitive society. They do what many parents have done elsewhere and in the past; they invest all their resources in just one or two children.

Then again, Singapore is dominated by a work culture. Hours are long and fathers are unlikely to utilize parental leave. As one male informant said: "You're in Singapore. In Singapore, you need to work, you don't work you die. . . . Even if the government gives support, cool. What about the private sector? How are they going to react to it?" (p. 99) This is not a place where family life is easy. As one of the women interviewed said:

> The government has this thing called "Eat with your Family Day," which I personally feel is so ridiculous because you promote that one day in the entire year, out of 365 days, to eat with your family . . . then what happens to the rest of the time? (p. 97)

One important point Sun makes is that current practice still reflects a eugenics mindset. In 1984, the government initiated policies to encourage well educated women to have more children. That policy proved a political liability and was quickly abandoned. But as Sun points out, income

tax relief only benefits fairly prosperous families. As one informant stated, "How much tax can be deducted from people of the middle class like us? Honestly speaking, they haven't deducted a cent of tax for my employment of more than 10 years, because there is nothing for them to deduct" (p. 85). And because information about pronatalist programs is not effectively disseminated to the poorer citizens, only better educated citizens tend to be aware of them.

If pronatalist policies are not working, why hasn't there been a shift in policy? The problem is that policy-making in Singapore is rather opaque. It would be nice to know what the government is thinking, but it is hard to find out. One hopes at least that the research embodied in this book will reach decision-makers. Of course, it may well be that the real policy of the government today is encouragement of immigration to maintain or even increase the size of the work force.

In her conclusion, Sun provides thoughtful and judicious recommendations for a set of pronatalist policies. But she points out that they cannot succeed if "access to education, health and housing is perceived or experienced to be increasingly limited and inequitable" (p. 137). The author argues that Singapore has the financial means to support a more generous approach—but would such policies be compatible with the governing Popular Action Party's vision of a productivist state?

This is an indispensable book, not only for those seeking to understand population policy in Singapore but for anyone concerned about what kinds of policies can stem the decline of birth rates throughout the world. It displays a remarkable mastery of the field. Sun demonstrates the ability to ask the right questions, develop an effective and appropriate methodology and provide answers. One looks forward to Sun's continued research in the field of population policy.

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* This review represents only the opinions of its author, and should not be construed as reflecting the opinions of the National Defense University, Department of Defense or U.S. Government.